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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

“‘DON’T EVER TELL ANYBODY ANYTHING. IF YOU DO, YOU START MISSING
EVERYBODY’: BOARDING SCHOOL NOVEL PROTAGONISTS AND THEIR FEAR OR
FASCINATION WITH DEATH”

submitted by

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In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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Introduction

How to Read Boarding School Novels

Boarding schools are institutions founded on privileged education which is apparent in their depiction in early novels which promote the structure of and benefits of their educational model. However, the boarding school novel offers, at times, another view of these schools. The novel offers a window into the psychology of adolescents in a rarified space of prestige and legacy. Due to the long-standing presence of boarding schools in society, the psychology of boarding school novel characters can be contextualized by the boarding school environment from 1946 to 2005.

For boarding school novels, there are multiple routes to explore: their history as a genre, their authorial demographic that is primarily white and male, the limited and relatively nonexistent footprint of female figures, and racial tension, to name a few. In researching boarding schools, there are many articles that criticize the institutions and ask how they have adapted their role in an ever-changing society. There is a connection between the depiction of boarding schools in literature and the impact of their confining environment on the characters in boarding school novels.

The history of the American boarding school is essential to understanding their changing role in literature and society. According to an article written by Steven Levine on the history of American boarding schools and their link to the upper class, “the upper class began the practice of sending their sons away to boarding school in the late nineteenth century.”¹ This is essential to

¹ Levine, Steven B. “The Rise of American Boarding Schools and the Development of a National Upper Class.” *Social Problems*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1980, pg. 68.

note because all of the novels discussed in this thesis are centered around male protagonists, showing the extensive connection between men and these institutions. Many established boarding schools trace their roots to Boston and were founded by prominent Boston families, such as the Groton School in Massachusetts and St. Paul's School in New Hampshire.² These schools' purpose was to provide secondary education to the upper class and, to a certain extent, "to create schools where the children of old established families would be isolated from the children of immigrants," which explains why these institutions are continually marked as "exclusive" and "elitist".³

Despite boarding schools' origins as exclusive, male driven locales of education, their role has shifted within the past fifty years to a more inclusive space by striving for diversity and honoring individuality similar to the model many colleges have begun to follow. David Hick's article, "The Strange Fate of the American Boarding School" written in 1996 comments on this claim and Hicks discusses the shortcomings of the boarding school model in an evolving society. Hicks concludes his article by stating that, "the fate of the boarding school is not sealed, but the resurgence and possible leadership of boarding schools in American education depend, it seems to me, on a bold reassertion of their individuality and an innovative use of their resources."⁴ There are ranging opinions regarding how boarding schools have broadened their models and tried to re-focus their efforts on creating a more diverse student body, Hicks is just one example. Through understanding the history of boarding schools, their various depictions in novels becomes clearer.

² Levine, pg. 68.

³ Levine, pg. 72.

⁴ Hicks, David V. "The Strange Fate of the American Boarding School." *The American Scholar* 65, no. 4 (1996): pg. 535.

The boarding school novel provides insight into the inner workings of both the administration and student body. Many young adult boarding school novels delve into the trials and tribulations of surviving in an exclusive space by following a main character throughout their educational and social journey. The history of boarding schools provides a model for comparison that allows readers to measure their own experiences against those of the boarding school novel protagonists.

Boarding school novels written by women or men of color are scarce, especially novels that focus on boarding schools without the incorporation of magic or espionage such as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* or Ally Carter's *Gallagher Girl* series. While these fantastical depictions serve a purpose within the broader realm of young-adult literature, they do not provide a realistic depiction of the contemporary boarding school experience. Therefore, it is challenging to analyze the school environment's impact on the character development in make-believe settings.

Black Ice by Lorene Cary is an exception to the boarding school novels laced with fantasy or male influence: it is a 1991 memoir discussing Cary's time spent at St. Paul's School in New Hampshire as a woman of color in the 1970s. This text provides a personal account of Cary's experience through an analysis of a female student's struggles and triumphs in a predominantly white male boarding school. *Black Ice* discusses the presence of racial inequality in boarding schools and the pressure of a boarding school education through its memoir genre. However, the memoir format does not evaluate the impact of boarding schools on characters and their development.

While fictional boarding school novels can demonstrate the influence of the environment on character development, not all of them center on the perspective of the student. *The Fall of Rome* is a 2003 novel by Martha Southgate describing an African American Latin teacher's

struggles at an all-male boarding school. This, while it is novel and not a memoir, is told from the perspective of the instructor and his struggles in the environment, unlike other novels that show the impact of the environment on students' actions. While *Black Ice* discusses the role of women and race in the boarding school environment in the 1970s, *The Fall of Rome* provides a fictional account of a teacher struggling with racial inequality. *The Fall of Rome* focuses on racial inequality in boarding schools from a teacher's perspective rather a student's which demonstrates how these figures deal with racial inequalities in boarding schools. *Black Ice* and *The Fall of Rome* are examples of boarding school texts that discuss the racial inequality in these institutions and demonstrate the impact of the boarding school the environment.

A text that centers on the boarding school experience through a fictional character is *The World According to Garp*, written in 1978 by John Irving. While this novel focuses on a fictional character's life spent at boarding school, they only attend boarding school for the first two chapters. Once the main character, Garp, graduates, his boarding school past becomes less relevant to the overall story of his life. This novel narrowed in on a perspective centered around a student living on a boarding school campus and their reactions to their environment. *The World According to Garp* focused on the depiction of a fictionalized student in a realistic boarding school which created a connection between the boarding school environment and the protagonist. *The Catcher in the Rye* is a prime example of a novel that focuses on a central character, Holden Caulfield, and his relationship to the boarding school environment. Holden lives on Pencey Preparatory School's campus and is a teenager in 1946 America where boarding schools were still known for their ties to elitism and legacy. *The Catcher in the Rye* fit the criteria of analysis and is the focal novel for this thesis through its depiction of the boarding school environment and its influence on a protagonist.

Similar to *The Catcher in the Rye* is *A Separate Peace* which was written in 1959 by John Knowles about a student, Gene Forester, who returns to his boarding school after graduating fifteen years prior. While there, he reminisces on his friendships and failures at Devon, his boarding school. Gene's retrospective narrative emphasizes the impact of the environment on his character because he picks memories to reflect upon. *Looking for Alaska* is the most contemporary of the chosen novels and focuses on a student, Miles Halter, who decides to attend boarding school and experiences their elitist undertones. These three novels, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *A Separate Peace*, and *Looking for Alaska* all fit the criteria of texts which center around protagonists at boarding schools.

To understand the impact of the boarding school environment on the protagonists, this thesis will use a psychoanalytic lens to analyze scenes from these three novels. There are two major theorists associated with psychoanalytic theory, including the famed psychiatrist himself, Sigmund Freud. Freudian analysis centers on his three psychic zones, the Id, the Superego, and the Ego. The Id is associated with humans' animalistic desire, the Superego emphasizes morality, and the Ego's aim is to counterbalance and compromise between the two extremes.⁵ These three zones work together to aid in conscious and unconscious decision making. There is often a conflict between desire and logic as a result of the three different zones. Freud's psychoanalytic work also focused intently on dream analysis through the idea that unconscious desires arise in dreams.⁶ His dream theory is applied to literature through the separation of dreams into representation, displacement, condensation, and secondary revision.

⁵ "A Guide to Psychoanalytic Criticism." A Research Guide for Students, August 30, 2018.

⁶ "Psychoanalytic Criticism." In *The Postmodern Bible: The Bible and Culture Collective*, edited by Castelli Elizabeth A., Moore Stephen D., Phillips Gary A., and Schwartz Regina M., by Aichele George, Burnett Fred W., Fowler Robert M., Jobling David, Pippin Tina, and Wuellner Wilhelm, 187-224. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1995, pg. 198.

A second prominent figure of psychoanalytic criticism is Jacques Lacan. His theory focuses on three central ideas. First, the idea that the unconscious is structured like a language. Second, the unconscious can be understood through figurative language. Third, the idea that the ego is natural and calm. Lacan applied Freud's ideas to literature through their applications with the structure of language.⁷ Lacan focuses on the progression of images from first the imaginary then to the symbolic then to the real world. Lacan's work, while essential to the broader scope of psychoanalytic theory, will not be used in this thesis due to its emphasis on progression of images rather than the unconscious motivations that Freud discusses.

One of the biggest criticisms about Freud and Lacan's theories of psychoanalysis is the lack of attention on women's roles. Julia Kristeva pushed the boundaries of their analysis through her discussion of the Oedipal complex's mother-infant relationship. For Kristeva, "all of these modifications in the linguistic fabric are the sign of a force that has not been grasped by the linguistic or ideological system."⁸ She pushes psychoanalytic theory farther by questioning women's roles. Her contributions are worth noting because they show the expansion of Freud and Lacan's idea towards the insertion of a feminist lens, which can be explored in boarding school novel analysis. Since *The Catcher in the Rye*, *A Separate Peace*, and *Looking for Alaska* are all male centered boarding school novels, and two of the texts are set at all-male boarding schools, Kristeva's analysis will not be used to analyze the impact of the boarding school environment on these male protagonists.

In this thesis, emphasis is placed specifically on Freud's discussion of death and the idea that people either have a fear or fascination with death. One of Freud's larger theories narrows in on what he refers to as 'the death drive.' This is the unconscious drive towards suicide and

⁷ "Psychoanalytic Criticism," pg. 199.

⁸ "Psychoanalytic Criticism," pg. 214.

suicidal actions which will not be vastly explored in this thesis and rather the division between the protagonist's fear and fascination with death will be the point of analysis. Freud's 'death drive' is helpful in understanding another route of analysis for the protagonist's relationships with death. In a book written on Freudian incorporations in literature by Robert Rowland Smith, he notes, "A living thing seeks death as an 'object' no longer outside itself, and thus may 'seek' it only blindly, becoming itself or fulfilling its ontological mission in the destruction of its ontic status, gathering itself into suicidal self- coincidence."⁹ It is useful to mention this theory since there are moments in *The Catcher in the Rye* where the protagonist confesses their suicidal thoughts.

Collectively, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *A Separate Peace* and *Looking for Alaska* capture the spirit of boarding schools by discussing how students grapple with their own fears and fascinations with death while living on a boarding school campus. These three novels show boarding schools both academically and socially through the protagonist's experiences. These three texts are all written by white male authors who attended boarding school, they center around white teenage male protagonists, and a significant portion of the plot occurs at boarding school. This builds upon boarding school depiction in novels and analyzes how the boarding school environment allows the protagonists to deal with their own fear and fascination regarding death in these confining settings. Using Freud's idea of fear and fascination with death, the protagonists in two of the novels are fearful while in one of the novels, the protagonist's relationship with death evolves. Juxtaposing these protagonists and their connection with death,

⁹ Smith, Robert Rowland. *Death-Drive: Freudian Hauntings in Literature and Art*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, pg. 69.

there are secondary characters that showcase a fascination with death which creates a strong contrast between the characters in all three of these works.

The plot point that ties these novels together is that for each protagonist, somebody close to them dies either during the course of the novel or prior to which factors into their relationship with death. In one case, the death is a family member, in the other two novels the death is a close friend. These characters must deal with death in a boarding school setting, creating a relationship between these places and their emotional relevancy. The protagonists are all away from their family, and while their families make rare appearances in the text, they do not help these three protagonists handle their feelings associated with death. The restrictions of the main character's setting effects how they handle the death of individuals close to them.

By comparing how the characters from these three texts emotionally fare at boarding school to how their grief would be handled at a day school or an institution in closer proximity to their family, the boarding school model can be examined. Since these students are at boarding schools, they are living on campuses with a plethora of faculty, but the faculty is rarely present to emotionally support these students. This thesis is making an argument which connects the character's relationship with death to their life on a boarding school campus which is seen in *The Catcher in the Rye*, *A Separate Peace*, and *Looking for Alaska*.

CHAPTER I

Holden's Fear in *The Catcher in the Rye*

The Catcher in the Rye is a quintessential example of a boarding school novel that contains a protagonist who is fearful of death. Written and set in 1951, Holden Caulfield, the novel's primary character, is widely identified with by adolescents and young adults as a figure of teenage angst. The book was originally intended for adults, but due to its discussions of rebellion, identity, and loss that identify with a teenage audience; it is now shelved as a YA novel.¹⁰ *The Catcher in the Rye* is written from a subjective point of view, Holden drives the plot and freely shares his opinions with the reader. He does not spend the entirety of the novel at boarding school, but boarding schools are referred to throughout, lending a comprehensive view of the institution and its influence. Boarding schools are designed to provide structure, but they leave Holden depressed and feeling alone.

Holden attends Pencey Preparatory Academy in Agerstown, Pennsylvania and the novel begins with him reflecting on his time there while he is under care in a sanitarium, "I'll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas just before I got pretty run-down and had to come out here and take it easy" (Salinger 1) is Holden's introduction to the reader. His story begins the day he leaves Pencey after flunking out. He does not tell his roommate, his peers, or his parents; he packs up, leaves the school and takes the train to New York City, his home. In New York, Holden hangs around Central Park and in bars, although he

¹⁰ Whitfield, Stephen J. "Cherished and Cursed: Toward a Social History of *The Catcher in the Rye*." *The New England Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (1997): pg. 568.

is not of age, smoking cigarettes and exercising his freedom in a way he could not at school. He is completely alone in the city and calls upon acquaintances from home and from his former schools, but they are people that he does not particularly like. Holden's dislike of boarding school is evident from the beginning of *The Catcher in the Rye* and he continues to reflect on his current and former boarding schools with disdain.

The word "madman" is used throughout the novel and shows Holden's mental turmoil and separation from society. The use of "madman" is the beginning of a larger discussion of the psychology of Holden as a character. The word is in the opening paragraph of the novel but is used fifteen times throughout *The Catcher in the Rye*. Carl Strauch notes that, "As we pursue the 'madman' pattern through its emotive transmutations we can see how Salinger loads his narrative with verbalisms that by themselves impart an evasively psychological tone."¹¹ Holden refers to himself as a madman, "I went right on smoking like a madman" (Salinger 47) but the term is most commonly used in an apologetic way, "I apologized like a madman" (Salinger 81, 126). Holden refers to his younger sister as a madman, "She's a madman sometimes" (Salinger 229). This term describes Holden's view of himself through his own personal characterization and is an introduction to Holden's character.

Holden's relationship with death is apparent through death of his younger brother Allie, three years before the novel begins. Death is discussed within other scenes and not independently because Holden has not come to terms with his brother's death, explaining his fear. Holden was sent to boarding school after his brother died, which took him away from home where he could have appropriately processed the trauma. Holden's first mentions Allie by stating, "He's dead now. He got leukemia and died when we were up in Maine, on July 18, 1946" (Salinger 43).

¹¹ Strauch, Carl F., and Salinger. "Kings in the Back Row: Meaning through Structure. A Reading of Salinger's 'The Catcher in the Rye'." *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 2, no. 1 (1961): pg. 12.

Holden's brother is intertwined into other scenes of the novel, but initially appears when Holden is describing an essay he wrote for his roommate, Ward Stradlater, about Allie's baseball mitt. Holden goes into crushing amounts of detail about the mitt and how it shows what kind of brother, student, and person Allie was. The first mention of his brother's death is when Holden is forced to confront it through writing an essay for his roommate.

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden's fear of death is contrasted by his younger sister Phoebe's fascination, which is evidenced through the difference in their age and environment. The trauma of their younger brother's death haunts Holden throughout the novel because he has been confined to a boarding school setting since his brother's death. Holden attends four different schools, linking Allie's death with these locations. While Susan Mizruchi, remarks that, "*Catcher in the Rye* might be read, for example, as critiquing the succession of upper-class prep schools that have given up on Holden Caulfield" this is not wholly applicable.¹² These schools have not given up on Holden since he rejects them first and does not give them a chance to help him. The boarding school environment impacts Holden's fear of death since he does not have the comforts of home or parental guidance to help him successfully mourn his brother's death. He is trapped within this community he dislikes and does not fit into, magnifying the emotional trauma of his brother's death.

Holden's fear of death is centered around the death of his younger brother which has significantly impacted his view of the world. Sigmund Freud notes that "the fear of death, which dominates us oftener than we know, is on the other hand something secondary, and is usually the outcome of a sense of guilt."¹³ While this statement is applicable to certain scenes in *The*

¹² Mizruchi, Susan. "The School of Martyrdom: Culture and Class in *Catcher in the Rye*." *Religion and Literature*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2015, pg. 23.

¹³ Freud, Sigmund. 1957. "Thoughts for the times on war and death". *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, pg. 14.

Catcher in the Rye, guilt is not the only driving force of Holden's actions. His guilt is tied to the theme of innocence and Holden's desire to protect the innocent since he was unable to protect his own brother. At the first mention of Allie, Holden remarks to the reader, "You'd have liked him. He was two years younger than I was, but he was about fifty times as intelligent. He was terrifically intelligent" (Salinger 43). The perfection that Holden associates with Allie shows the guilt Holden feels because Allie died rather than Holden. Holden was asked to leave multiple schools throughout his educational journey, so he juxtaposes himself with Allie academically, "His [Allie's] teachers were always writing letters to my mother, telling her what a pleasure it was having a boy like Allie in their class" (Salinger 43). He compares Allie to himself multiple times, with his brother reigning superior in each moment.

This academic comparison shows Allie as the outstanding sibling in the family, he had potential that the rest of the Caulfield children did not. Phoebe, the youngest, is not included in these comparisons and neither is the eldest, D.B; the passage compares Holden directly to Allie. Holden's fear of death is prominent, but the underlying emotion of guilt is seen in these glimpses of Holden's mediocrity in comparison to his brother. This demonstrates that Allie's death had mental and physical repercussions for Holden. Holden was only thirteen when Allie died, "...and they were going to have me psychoanalyzed and all, because I broke all the windows in the garage. I don't blame them. I really don't" (Salinger 44). The impact of Allie's death is described through Holden's eyes, where he is honest to the reader, this passage is not tainted by Holden's negative perspective. Throughout much of the text, Holden refers to other characters negatively, but not Allie, he is perfect in Holden's eyes.

Holden is aware that his brother's death has impacted his mental health and perspective of life. Holden admits that he does not blame "them" for wanting him psychoanalyzed, Allie's

death influenced Holden's mental state rendering him fearful of death. This image of Holden breaking the glass in the garage is representative of, "Mutilation is itself the physical symbol of a psychological state of self-accusation and self-laceration."¹⁴ Holden's grief is represented physically, the glass shattered his reflection of life. While Holden does not inflict harm upon himself, breaking the glass is connected with self-accusation. He blames himself for Allie's death and feels the need to punish himself, as if losing his younger brother was not punishment enough. The impact of Allie's death is demonstrated throughout the novel through multiple facets, including his dislike of certain characters.

Holden disapproves of successful figures during the novel through his views of his older brother D.B and a Pencey alum named Ossenburger. Allie's death tainted Holden's view of success. Alexander Pitofsky states, "Thus, the thought of pursuing things denied to his brother fills Holden with shame and he recoils from characters who do not share his misgivings about success."¹⁵ Pitofsky argues that the death of Holden's brother has led him to dislike successful people. This is seen at Pencey and Holden's other boarding schools because successful figures are littered throughout the campus. Pencey's motto promotes the success of its students, "Since 1888 we have been molding boys into splendid, clear-thinking young men" (Salinger 4). Ossenburger is an exemplification of Pencey's motto because he has left Pencey and gone on to run a successful undertaking business. Boarding schools are business themselves and according to Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, "The privilege of belonging to an elite boarding school involves economic as well as psychic investments while also requiring commitment and

¹⁴ Strauch, pg. 16.

¹⁵ Pitofsky, Alex. "Masculine Competition and Boarding-School Culture in *The Catcher in the Rye*." *Studies in American Culture*, vol. 34, no. 1, Oct. 2011, pg. 75.

dedication to the philosophies that schools espouse.”¹⁶ Pencey is depicted as a business molding their students and sending them out into the world as clear-thinking young men. Holden’s dislike of Pencey is connected to his aversion to successful figures.

Holden did not attend Allie’s funeral because Holden was hospitalized after breaking the windows, so he did not process the death of his brother. Interestingly, Allie’s death did not stop Holden’s older brother, D.B, from advancing his career. Holden disconnects with D.B once he moves to Los Angeles to work in film, which Holden sees as selling out. He feels that D.B is taking his talent as a writer and magnifying it, “Now he’s out in Hollywood, D.B, being a prostitute. If there’s one thing I hate, it’s the movies” (Salinger 4). Holden compares his older brother to a prostitute; D.B is selling himself in return for the success and fame of the film industry. Holden’s disapproval of success in his brother is an example of the restriction of guilt on his conscious.

Phoebe is the only one of the Caulfield children who Holden talks to in the novel so there is arguably more insight into her character than D.B or Allie. Phoebe retains an innocence that Holden has lost since Allie’s death, her world has not been tainted to the same degree due to her brother’s death. Phoebe attends elementary school in New York City, the same school Holden went to when he was her age. For her, school is not linked with Allie’s death. Phoebe did not leave home to attend school after Allie’s death, she remained in New York, sleeping in her own bed every night. Phoebe’s fascination with death is seen plainly in her description of a movie, *The Doctor*:

That's why he sticks this blanket over her face and everything and makes her suffocate.

Then they make him go to jail for life imprisonment, but this child that he stuck the

¹⁶ Gaztambide-Fernández, Rubén. "What Is an Elite Boarding School?" *Review of Educational Research* 79, no. 3 (2009): pg. 1114.

blanket over its head comes to visit him all the time and thanks him for what he did. He was a mercy killer. Only, he knows he deserves to go to jail because a doctor isn't supposed to take things away from God (Salinger 180).

Phoebe is not confined to a setting devoid of parents and escape, showing her fascination rather than fear of death.

Phoebe's age impacts her relationship with death; she is only ten years old, six years younger than Holden. Allie was eleven when he died, three years before the beginning of this novel, making Phoebe the youngest of the Caulfield children. While it is evident that Phoebe has a grasp on ethics and religion from her description of *The Doctor*, it appears she is scarred by its violence and mature themes. When Phoebe uses terminology such as "mercy killer," she is remarking on the adult aspects of this film. She is excited to explain the film to Holden and she is not distressed by the violence, it is the part she focuses most intently on. Phoebe has accepted the finality of death and accepts the dangers of life that Holden is chased with.

One of the divisions in Freud's psychoanalysis is the line between the child and adult and their relationship to death; Phoebe demonstrates the view of the child while Holden has the perspective of an adult. One of the deviations, notes Freud, is that "children alone disregard this restriction, they unashamedly threaten one another with the possibility of dying, and even go so far as to do the same thing to someone whom they love...The civilized adult can hardly entertain the thought of another person's death without seeming to himself hard-hearted or wicked."¹⁷ When Phoebe finds out that Holden has gotten kicked out of another school, she remarks, "Daddy's gonna kill you" (Salinger 183). While this is a euphemism, she is making a

¹⁷ Freud, pg. 289.

comparison between getting in trouble and being killed. Her childlike sense of death can be seen here but is juxtaposed with the mature acts in *The Doctor*.

When Holden remarks on his own eventual death, his tone obscures how serious he is about the act of dying. In one scene, he directly comments on the impact of movies in conjunction to how violently he reacts after getting beaten up in a New York City hotel after refusing to pay the full fee for a prostitute. Holden goes on for a paragraph explaining how he pretended he had a bullet in his gut and how he staggered to the bathroom, ending this soliloquy with, “The goddamn movies. They can ruin you. I’m not kidding” (Salinger 116). This scene takes place before he returns home and talks with Phoebe which makes Phoebe a prime example of the impact of violent films and she exemplifies Holden’s concerns. His hatred of the movies reappears in this scene, bringing back ideas of guilt for Allie’s death and the success of other figures.

Phoebe’s incorporation of religion to her view of death relates to Freud’s commentary that, “...religions succeeded in representing this after-life as the more desirable, the truly valid one, and in reducing the life, which is ended by death to a mere preparation.”¹⁸ Freud notes that religion makes the concept of death less fear inducing, so Phoebe is not terrified by death at her young age. She believes in the afterlife and it answers all of the questions she would have about death; there is no fear because there is an explanation:

[Holden] ‘I like Allie,’ I said. ‘And I like doing what I’m doing right now. Sitting here with you, and talking, and thinking about stuff and—’

[Phoebe] ‘Allie’s *dead*-You always say that! If somebody’s dead and everything, and in *Heaven*, then isn’t it really—’

¹⁸ Freud, pg. 295.

[Holden] ‘I know he’s dead! Don’t you think I know that? I can still like him, though, can’t I? Just because somebody’s dead, you don’t just stop liking them, for God’s sake-- especially if they were about a thousand times nicer than the people you know that’re *alive* and all’ (Salinger 189).

Holden uses ambiguous language such as “stuff” and “doing what I’m doing right now” while he is struggling to answer Phoebe’s question. The repetition of these nondescript terms indicate that Holden is trying to get his idea across, but he cannot elaborate on the phrase, “doing what I’m doing now.” He is not referencing a specific incident, just the act of spending time with his sister, but Phoebe interrupts this reflection. The italics emphasize parts of Phoebe’s commentary, which should resonate with Holden because to her, Allie is in Heaven. Holden asks rhetorical questions which lead to a deeper and broader discussion than Phoebe’s original question was wholly prepared to analyze.

Since Holden went to boarding school shortly after the death of his brother, he was unable to deal with the event appropriately. During the novel, Allie’s death is been repressed because Holden often refers to Allie as if he is still alive. Holden claims that Allie, even dead, is superior to the majority of the living people Holden knows. Phoebe is wrapped up in the logistics of death because she believes that the dead are in heaven, so if they are not mortal beings they are not an answer to her question.

In Phoebe’s summary of *The Doctor*, religion plays a role in her argument. In this case, she brings up Heaven. Phoebe is content knowing that Allie is in a place that is superior to mortal life. During this conversation about Allie between Phoebe and Holden, their opposing views of death are apparent. While Holden and Phoebe are emotionally close in the novel, this is their first discussion of Allie that the reader is privy to. This conversation appears to be repeated

because after Holden answers, Phoebe remarks, “you always say that!” (Salinger 189). For both characters, the tension between the fear and fascination of death is apparent and is centered around the trauma of their brother’s death three years ago.

Holden takes a mature view on religion when he states, “In the first place, my parents are different religions, and all the children in our family are atheists. If you want to know the truth, I can’t even stand ministers” (Salinger 112). This shows that Holden’s parents disagree in their religious beliefs and that their children do not adopt a religion. Holden’s opinion on ministers is his own, he has made a decision based on his experiences with religion that have led him to this conclusion. While Phoebe appears to believe in the concept of God and Heaven, Holden assumes she is an atheist.

Phoebe maintains that even though Holden loves Allie, he is not an appropriate answer to naming one thing Holden “likes a lot”. To Phoebe, Allie is dead, so he cannot be something Holden loves in the current moment. It is important to note, as Hugh Maclean does, “It is however significant that the thing he likes best is *not* in this world: his dead brother Allie.”¹⁹ Holden likes people, but he only likes somebody who he does not and cannot interact with anymore. Holden does not appreciate Phoebe’s reminder of Allie’s death and this statement irritates him, so he justifies his love for Allie which was never in question. His view of religion is different than Phoebe’s, Holden does not buy into religion, he is skeptical.

When Phoebe asks Holden the original question he says, “But the trouble was, I couldn’t concentrate” (Salinger 187) and he thinks about the nuns he met in New York City then his mind wanders to James Castle. James was a boy Holden knew at his former boarding school, Elkton Hills, who jumped out of the window to commit suicide while wearing Holden’s borrowed

¹⁹ Maclean, Hugh. “Conservatism in Modern American Fiction.” *College English* 15, no. 6 (1954): pg. 321.

sweater. Holden did not really know the nuns or James; when he is trying to think of things he liked, he reflects on one brief interaction and one traumatic one. His inability to concentrate on Phoebe's question shows how Holden struggles to identify what he loves in his life. Holden's struggle to enjoy life is apparent throughout the novel since he tends to find fault in virtually everything, even in his older brother. Holden's mind wanders to death through James which leads him to mention Allie as the one thing he truly loved.

Allie and James' death have made Holden fearful of death. James Castle, a minor character, plays a major role in Holden's relationship with death by exemplifying his fear. Through the confinement of Elkton Hills, James' suicide a product of this environment. The absence of parents or professors to stop James from committing suicide after being bullied creates a haunting reality. In this boarding school setting, the tension between members of the student body is enough to lead to drastic measures:

Finally, what he did, instead of taking back what he said, he jumped out the window. I was in the *shower* and all, and even *I* could hear him land outside. But I just thought something fell out of the window, a radio or a desk or something, not a *boy* or anything...He was dead, and his teeth, and blood, were all over the place, and nobody would even go near him. He had on this turtleneck sweater I'd lent him (Salinger 188).

This is a turning point for Holden because even though Allie has already died, he is linked to a second death. Allie died from leukemia; his death could not have been stopped unlike James'. While Holden barely knew James, he was tied to his death through the borrowed turtleneck sweater. James' body could have just as easily been Holden's, very little separated the two characters reinstating Holden's association of guilt and death. This gory suicide juxtaposes the

slower death of Allie; James' death was one of brute force. His suicide shows Holden's proximity to death after he had tried to escape the trauma of his childhood.

Holden's description intensifies as he goes from using words such as "something" and "anything" when discussing James describing the aftermath of the suicide. When James jumps out of the window, death is one of the furthest things from Holden's mind since he remarks that he thought the noise of the body was a radio or a desk instead. The impact of the death is clear through these details when Holden remarks, "even *I* could hear him" (Salinger 188) indicating that the sound was audible in the showers. These descriptions of Holden's location exemplify the boarding school environment, Holden likens the body to objects common in dorm rooms, such as radios and desks. Through this environmental restriction, Gaztambide-Fernández argues that "The specificity that the residential space adds to the experience of students in an elite boarding school is of great significance."²⁰ The fact that Holden heard the noise from the communal showers identifies another aspect of life at boarding school. The boarding school environment is constant and unchanging during traumatic events such as James Castle's death.

Holden's relationship the dead, such as James and Allie, allows insight into his fear of death. Freud remarks that "Towards the actual person who has died we adopt a special attitude—something almost like admiration for someone who has accomplished a very difficult task."²¹ This attitude is shown through Allie's death; Allie has avoided a life filled with phonies which Holden is currently living. In regard to James, Holden's sentiments are not sorrowful, he is shocked and confused. Holden does not mention crying or attending a funeral, just observing the scene from an outside view, looking at the body. Holden's emotions are present in the text, but in

²⁰ Gaztambide-Fernández, pg. 1096.

²¹ Freud, pg. 290.

regard to James' death, little emotion is shown. Holden's only admiration of James' death is that James got to escape the confines of Elkton Hills which Holden was stuck in.

Throughout the novel, Holden criticizes people and does not enjoy anybody's company except for Phoebe's. If Holden had been bullied as roughly, he could have been in James' place. Holden explains that James was bullied because he said something about one of his conceited peers, Phil Stabile. The only time James and Holden spoke was when James asked to borrow Holden's sweater, which Holden remarks, "I damn near dropped dead when he asked me, I was so surprised and all. I remember I was brushing my teeth, in the can, when he asked me...I didn't even know he knew I *had* a turtleneck sweater" (Salinger 189). Through the parallel structure of these two interactions with James, death prevails.

The turtleneck sweater links this event to school because borrowing clothes from other students would not happen at day schools. Holden also mentions James' name that came before his during roll call, "Castle, Caulfield," a pairing of the characters. This is essential to boarding school because it places the two characters in an environment where their attendance is part of the daily routine and they are accounted for. Holden was in the bathroom during his first conversation with James and was there again when he jumped out of the window. Teeth are mentioned twice when Holden is describing James' suicide, further linking the two characters. When James and Holden first met, Holden was brushing his teeth and when James died, his teeth were "all over the place." The window connects James' suicide to Allie because when Allie died, Holden broke all of the glass windows in the garage. In this case, the glass is representative of a failure to grow and adapt, rather than the stereotypical view of breaking glass representing change.²² The connection between James and Holden depicts James as, "a sacrificial substitute,

²² Mizruchi, pg. 31.

who apparently falls so Holden wouldn't have to."²³ This entire scene is one of the novel's ritual incidents which contributes to Holden's fear of death.

In a setting such as Elkton Hills, another boarding school, events such as bullying were contained, Holden remarks that James was locked in a room and "...they started in on him. I won't even tell you what they did to him—it's too repulsive—but he *still* wouldn't take it back, old James Castle" (Salinger 188). There are no parents or adult figures involved, it was a matter taken into the hands of the students, his peers caused James' death. The bullying happened behind closed doors; the only escape was the window. Holden remarks on the involvement of authority figures by stating, "All they did with the guys that were in the room with him was expel them. They didn't even go to jail" (Salinger 188). The students who bullied James were freed from the confines of this boarding school instead of being locked away, trapped once again.

This bullying scene is foreshadowed earlier in the novel, after Holden has been beaten up by a pimp. Holden stays in the bathroom for a while, reflecting on the event and then goes to bed, remarking, "What I really felt like, though, was committing suicide. I felt like jumping out the window. I probably would've done it, too, if I'd been sure somebody'd cover me up as soon as I landed. I didn't want a bunch of stupid rubbernecks looking at me when I was all gory" (Salinger 117). Holden's fear of death is visible in this passage, while he remarks that he *would* commit suicide, he is stopped by the mere vanity of it. He does not want his body to be viewed by people he dislikes, like James Castle's was. Holden demonstrates his seriousness by stating, "I probably would've done it too," but this is not definitive due to the use of the word "probably". These vague terms are sprinkled into descriptions of death, but those of Allie, where

²³ Mizruchi, pg. 30.

Holden's depictions are certain. The window is an escape route, another linkage between James and Holden. Holden is fearful of the aftermath of his death, how he will appear to others, there is no evidence of a fascination with death.

Ironically, Holden mentions suicide during a time when he is not at a boarding school, he is completely alone and free in a large city. In this case, the context shapes how Holden behaves and thinks, but only to some extent. Due to his time spent in boarding school, Holden is unable to enjoy this newfound freedom and continues to call upon people he does not like, making his surroundings similar to at Pencey. The boarding school environment has constrained Holden and left him unable to relish in his own freedom, even though freedom is what Holden has sought since the beginning of the novel. He wants to be free to escape the intense emotions of Allie's death that follow him at boarding school, but they continue to shadow Holden in the city as well. Holden has not grasped how much of an impact Allie's death has had on virtually every aspect of his life.

The thread of Holden's depression in this novel is unbroken, it lingers on the page, through his disdain of his life and surroundings. When Holden first enters the New York City hotel room he remarks, "I was too depressed to care whether I had a good view or not" (Salinger 68). In his darker moments, Holden references suicide, but the thought never leads to action. Suicide is seen as a consolation; it is the possibility to exit from the life he abhors. At Pencey, there is no exit and while the boarding school is an independent environment, it still has a strict structure. Holden dislikes this structure, yet he attends a multitude of schools against his will. All of his surroundings depress him and remind him of Allie.

The confinement of the school environment appears through the drastic wording that Holden uses, the only escape from this suffocating structure is suicide. Holden's initial

description of Pencey shows his outsider status, he mocks the importance of the football game, “The game with Saxon Hall was supposed to be a very big deal around Pencey. It was the last game of the year, and you were supposed to commit suicide or something if old Pencey didn’t win” (Salinger 4). This intensifies the notion that the only escape from this environment is through death. This statement explains the society of the school and its conformist nature, the game is supposed to be taken seriously by all of the students and a loss is taken intensely. If Pencey loses, there is nothing worth living for, this game is the central focus of the Saturday.

The importance of athletics is an essential aspect of the boarding school model of education. In Gaztambide-Fernández’s article, he states that “Sports are a centerpiece of the nonacademic culture at elite boarding schools, and there are important traditions that revolve around sports such as pep rallies and rivalries with particular schools.”²⁴ Holden does not participate in athletics except for his role as, “I was the goddamn manager of the fencing team. Very big deal” (Salinger 5). Ironically, even in this position as the manager of a team rather than a participant, Holden loses all of the foils and fencing equipment while the team is in New York for a meet against the McBurney School. He is not a team player but is an outsider and is ostracized by the team for losing all of the equipment. Holden’s dismisses athletics both as a manager of a team and by mocking the rivalry of the football game which shows his disassociation with the boarding school model of education and participation.

The headmasters at Holden’s boarding schools are depicted negatively and their role is one that, “emphasized leadership as a goal for the students, bypassing the question of leadership’s direction.”²⁵ At Pencey, Holden refers to the headmaster as “old Thurmer,” using the same adjective that is accompanied with many of the depictions of Pencey itself. Holden’s

²⁴ Gaztambide-Fernández, pg. 1104.

²⁵ Saveth, Edward N. “Education of an Elite.” *History of Education Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (1988): pg. 378.

former headmaster at Elkton Hills, Mr. Haas, is described as, “the phoniest bastard I ever met in my life” (Salinger 17). Holden’s opinion of powerful figures as “phonies” and “old” indicate tension with people who are meant to provide structure and, at times, stand in for the role of parental guidance for the students. This rejection of authority explains the suffocating nature of boarding school that Holden feels because these guiding individuals do little more than frustrate Holden and point out his flaws.

The personification of Pencey demonstrates how proud the students should feel about the school, but Holden rejects this admiration. Within the history of boarding schools, “Character building involved some sacrifice of individuality to patterned behavior and a sense of collective identity.”²⁶ Holden has attempted to maintain his individuality by not buying into the motto and goal of the school, rendering him a dissenter. Interestingly, the first mention of suicide appears at Pencey but is revisited outside of the boarding school locale later in the novel. Holden does not tie these boarding schools to their education goals, but trauma and tradition.

Holden is an outcast at Pencey and does not get along well with his peers, he only spends time with them out of necessity. Pitofsky notes how Holden watching the student body depicts him, “as removed from his schoolmates as a phantom watching the mortal world go on without him.”²⁷ Pitofsky’s analysis shows the connection to death which exemplifies Holden’s outsider status. Holden was emotionally stunted when Allie died, “Holden was then thirteen, and four years later—the time of the narrative—he is emotionally the same age, although he has matured into a gangly six-foot adolescent.”²⁸ Holden prefers to be alone, yet longs for emotional support

²⁶ Saveth, Edward N, pg. 373.

²⁷ Pitofsky, Alexander H. *American Boarding School Fiction, 1928–1981: A Critical Study*. McFarland, 2014, pg. 24.

²⁸ Miller, Edwin Haviland. “In Memoriam: Allie Caulfield in “The Catcher in the Rye”.” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 15, no. 1 (1982): pg. 129.

which is not provided by the boarding school environment. His inability to mature emotionally has left him fearful of death, floating in this purgatory of adolescence.

The feeling of being trapped on a boarding school campus is apparent in the novel through Holden's expression of emotion. When he is talking with Ackley, one of Holden's friends who he commonly criticizes, Holden's interior dialogue shifts to the statement, "I almost wished I was dead" (Salinger 54). While this line is loosely quoted from Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Holden is likening himself to Huck, another character struggling with solitude. Holden ponders death while he is looking out the window, a symbol of escape throughout the novel exemplified by James Castle's death. Even the temperature of the school is uncomfortable, "At Pencey, you either froze to death or died of the heat" (Salinger 27). In Holden's descriptions, the school is littered with extremes, from the temperature to the school spirit. He is trapped in an environment that is confining, not allowing him to be comfortable. Whether the school is too hot or too cold, death is the result according to Holden's depiction.

The temperature is mentioned when Holden is observing the football game against Saxton Hall to which he remarks, "it was as cold as a witch's teat" (Salinger 6). Miller argues that this remark signifies Holden's desire for maternal warmth, he needs it before he goes and bids farewell to his history teacher.²⁹ The juxtaposition of the cold, loneliness of watching the game from atop "that stupid hill" and the maternal warmth he desires, shows Holden's yearning for the comforts of home. The lack of warm, parental figures at Pencey adds to the isolation that Holden experiences during his time there.

Throughout *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden states that he is depressed over fifty times. His depression is accompanied by a sense of isolation enforcing one of Holden's most prominent

²⁹ Miller, pg. 131.

emotions. Holden's isolation according to Miller, "reveals the true nature of his state, no one in the novel recognizes the signal, perceiving the boy as a kind of adolescent clown rather than a seriously troubled youth."³⁰ Holden's depression is seen both inside and outside of the boarding school setting. At Elkton Hills his roommate put Holden's suitcases out on display because they were nicer to which Holden remarks, "It depressed the holy hell out of me" (Salinger 121). When Holden sees couples in New York City he remarks that "It makes you feel so lonesome and depressed" (Salinger 91). This sense of isolation that was prevalent in the boarding school environment has carried into Holden's time in the city, no matter who he is around, he is increasingly lonely.

The guilt that Holden feels about missed opportunities with Allie is one of the many reasons he is depressed. While in the city, Holden talks out loud to Allie and remembers when he would not let Allie come and shoot BB guns with one of Holden's friends in Maine. Holden remarks that "So once in a while, now, when I get depressed, I keep saying to him, 'Okay. Go home and get your bike and meet me in front of Bobby's house'" (Salinger 110). Throughout *The Catcher in the Rye*, when Holden compares himself to Allie, Allie reigns supreme in every incident. This memory is no different, Holden remembers that, "He [Allie] didn't get sore about it—he never got sore about anything—but I keep thinking about it anyway, when I get very depressed" (Salinger 117). Allie couldn't get mad, while Holden holds grudges and despises the majority of the characters he interacts with in the course of the novel.

Holden's memories of Allie are sprinkled throughout his time in New York as he trudges desperately alone through the city. He is alone and worried about death, "Anyway, I kept worrying that I was getting pneumonia, with all those chunks of ice in my hair, and that I was

³⁰ Miller, pg. 130.

going to die” (Salinger 171) and there is nobody who could save him if he died of pneumonia in the city. This segues into a vision of Holden’s own funeral:

I felt sorry as hell for my mother and father. Especially my mother, because she still isn’t over my brother Allie yet. I kept picturing her not knowing what to do with all my suits and athletic equipment and all. The only good thing, I knew she wouldn’t let Phoebe come to my goddamn funeral because she was only a little kid. That was the only good part. Then I thought about the whole bunch of them sticking me in a goddamn cemetery and all, with my name on the tombstone and all. Surrounded by dead guys. Boy, when you’re dead they really fix you up. (Salinger 171)

This fear of dying comes full circle with Holden’s vision of his funeral. He empathizes with his parents, unsure if they could handle losing a second child. Holden imagines his funeral being tainted with visions of his brother. Holden inadvertently stunts Phoebe’s emotional maturity by not having her attend the funeral meaning that her emotional age would remain ten. She would not emotionally evolve so Holden would be hindering her and putting her in the same position that he is currently in as a result of Allie’s death.

The selflessness of his funeral impacts Holden, he does not want to be placed next to dead people he does not know. The emphasis on material goods, such as Holden’s athletic equipment and suits relates his vision of death to Allie and his baseball mitt. The repetition of Holden mentioning the “only good” parts of his imagined funeral show Holden’s attempt at viewing this event holistically. His emotion is strong, he feels “sorry as hell,” for putting his parents through a second death which is Holden’s first reaction when he is imagining his death. His distinction between himself and “dead guys,” show that the gravity of his own death is resonating through an analysis of his imagined funeral.

Holden's preoccupation with death is further reflected in his schoolwork. While *The Catcher in the Rye* can be seen as a mourning for Allie, Holden's writing samples (for history and English) betray an exclusive interest in the dead—Egyptian burial practices and his dead brother's glove—and the one Pencey sermon he remembers is delivered by an alumnus who is an undertaker.”³¹ These events show Holden's fear of death, he is trying to grapple with death through his school assignments. Holden is scared that if he dies, he will not be presented appropriately or that somebody such as Ossenburger will be the one to bury him. Contrastingly, Phoebe uses faith to understand death, Heaven is where she will be after death, no longer preoccupied with the mortal world. Allie's death has created these questions and desire for answers, so Holden will not be satisfied until he has a certainty of the unknown.

The psychological nature of the novel questions Holden's connection between death and sex. Sex is apparent throughout *The Catcher in the Rye* but is only pursued when Holden has left the confinement of Pencey. In the city, he talks to and about women frequently, when he was at Pencey the only woman he mentioned was Jane Gallagher, Holden's childhood friend that his roommate went on a date with. He notes that his roommate has special privilege to use the coach's car on dates, making it difficult for boys in Holden's position at Pencey to have any semblance of a dating life. The isolation of the boarding school plays a large role in understanding Holden's sexual escapades when he is alone in the city, seeking companionship.

Since Holden is, for part of the novel, free from these confines he should be able to experience independence because the city will let him escape the restrictions of his life and lift the confinement that he feels. However, due to the constraining nature of boarding school, Holden does not know what to do once he is placed in a new environment and his habits stick

³¹ Mizruchi, pg. 30.

with him. Holden is overwhelmed by the opposition of the restriction of boarding school and the freedom of the city as a result of Allie's death stunting his emotional growth. He cannot embrace the freedom; the boarding school setting has stunted his ability to survive in an unstructured setting.

The themes of sex and death combine while Holden is in the city describing a scene he witnessed at a club, "What he was doing, he was giving her a feel under the table, and at the same time telling her all about some guy in his dorm that had eaten a whole bottle of aspirin and nearly committed suicide" (Salinger 96). Holden is repulsed by seeing death as a seduction tactic. It is in this instance that, "we get an early hint of one of the most dangerous manifestations of his neurosis: his association of sex with death."³² Sex is a theme throughout *The Catcher in the Rye*, from Holden's lack of sexual experience in comparison to his suave roommate to Holden's attempt to sexually educate himself with the aid of a prostitute. Sex is a coping mechanism for Holden, he uses it to try and normalize himself with his peers.

The language that Holden uses to describe his sexual observations is characterized by Carl Strauch, "Holden's slob speech is obviously justified as a realistic narrative device, since it is the idiom of the American male; yet from the psychological point of view, it becomes the boy's self-protective acceptance of the slob values of his prep school contemporaries."³³ Holden's terminology such as, "giving her a feel," is used similarly throughout the novel, sometimes in lieu of the term, "giving her the time." Holden's inability to completely understand sex is evident because Holden uses vague terms, demonstrating his struggles with sex through the utilization of slob speech.

³² Bryan, James. "The Psychological Structure of *The Catcher in the Rye*." *PMLA* 89, no. 5 (1974): pg. 1067.

³³ Strauch, pg. 7.

Sex appears throughout *The Catcher in the Rye* in contradictory ways, with Holden stating, “In my mind, I’m probably the biggest sex maniac you ever saw” (Salinger 70). However, a few sentences later, he claims, “Sex is something I just don’t understand. I swear to God I don’t” (Salinger 71). Holden’s inexperience with sex is obvious and he wants to be like his roommate and take girls on dates and “give them the time,” but he is emotionally stunted at age thirteen. Allie most likely did not have any sexual experience due to his age at the time of his death, so sex is something that Holden is experiencing that his dead brother never will. This inexperience of sexual acts is another way that Allie’s death haunts Holden in the novel. His fear of death is exemplified even through sexual actions, continuing to stunt Holden’s growth as a character.

The most prominent evidence of Holden’s lack of sexual experience is his attempt at sex with a prostitute in New York City named Sunny. When Sunny arrives in Holden’s hotel room, he realizes how overwhelmed he is by the prospect of sex. Holden realizes he is not prepared, nor does he want to have sex with her, he wants her to be his confidante, a role she does not agree with.³⁴ This reinforces Holden’s need for emotional support, he wanted to spend time with somebody in his isolating state. Sunny is also, by name, associated with the mythical sun goddess and she appears before the scene with Phoebe in the novel.³⁵ Her role indicates that Holden does not need sexual companionship, he merely wanted comfort.

The structure of *The Catcher in the Rye* creates strong evidence of Holden’s fear of death in the novel. Strauch analyzes Holden’s psychological journey and comments on the connections of the structure, “all or most of the psychological and philosophical insight can be gained only

³⁴ Miller, pg. 134.

³⁵ Ibid.

through a recognition of the interlocking metaphorical structure.”³⁶ The parallel structure is exemplified in the titular line of the book, “If a body catch a body coming through the rye,” a misquoted line from a poem by Robert Burns that Holden remembers. This line connects multiple events of the novel into one central idea, focused on the idea of saviors.

When Holden mentions this line to Phoebe, she retorts by stating that, “It’s ‘if a body *meet* a body coming through the rye!’ old Phoebe said. “It’s a poem by Robert *Burns*”” (Salinger 191). The change of the one word, from “catch” to “meet” is significant, Holden wants to be active and catch rather than meet the children in his imagination. This is an image that Holden carries with him, “Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all...I have to come out and from somewhere and *catch* them. That’s all I’d do all day” (Salinger 191). He was not able to save Allie, but there is room for him to save the lives of children he does not know, to help them retain the innocence Holden has lost.

This discussion between Phoebe and Holden indicates a shift in the narrative, Holden has found a role he would enjoy which, “is a compound of his own anecdote to Phoebe of how James Castle plunged to his death and of the snatch of a song Holden had heard.”³⁷ The pinnacle of the novel represents Holden’s relationship with death because while he was not able to save someone he loved, he could save children like Phoebe who are carefree and innocent. The titular line in the text exemplifies Holden’s journey and his new level of comprehension of Allie’s death. Holden is taking the death of his brother and trying to emotionally evolve and spare others the trauma that he has gone through.

In reflection, understanding Holden’s desire to save others is seen sparsely, but does appear in the text. When he is conversing with nuns in New York City, he gives them some of

³⁶ Staunch, pg. 7.

³⁷ Strauch, pg. 20.

his money, a gesture to protect the innocent. Holden's character falls on both sides of this idea of the catcher and the innocent. The fall of James Castle shows Holden's role as an innocent figure who is in need of saving because Holden is merely a witness. Holden's desire to be a catcher is seen through the imagery of his brother's baseball mitt and the wearing of hunting cap, identifying Holden as a figure of action. Of course, this desire for a life consisting of catching children from falling in a large field is impossible, it is an imagined scenario representative of Holden's inner turmoil at his inability to save Allie.

The analysis of Holden's fear of death is exemplified through Allie's death and Holden's lack of emotional growth since the death of his younger brother. This titular explanation is a pivotal event in the psychological development of Holden's character and due to his adolescent age, explains the difference between his perception of death and Phoebe's. Throughout the novel, Holden is trapped both inside and outside of Pencey and he is unable to find the emotional support that he requires. *The Catcher in the Rye* uses the boarding school structure to exemplify the psychological fear of death seen in Holden's character.

CHAPTER II

Gene's Fear in *A Separate Peace* & Miles' Evolution in *Looking for Alaska*

The role of the boarding school in American novels is prominent, but the depiction and influence of the school varies from text to text. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, the boarding school environment has a negative impact on Holden and stunts his emotional growth, however in *A Separate Peace*, the setting is viewed less negatively but is still impactful. The protagonist of *A Separate Peace* deals with his fear of death on a confined campus in New England, likening the two novels. *A Separate Peace* describes the unexpected nature of death and depicts an overall appreciation for the boarding school model but similar to *Catcher in the Rye*, the main characters overlap in age and their relationships to death.

This chapter will take the analysis of *The Catcher in the Rye* and apply it to different texts. The two novels in this chapter, *A Separate Peace* and *Looking for Alaska*, will use *The Catcher in the Rye* as a touchstone for comparison to build upon ideas discussed in the first chapter. While one of the two novels in this chapter deals with the protagonist's fear of death, the other contains a protagonist whose perspective diverges in the middle of the novel, showing a new area of analysis between these novels. *A Separate Peace* and *Looking for Alaska* are combined in this chapter to showcase the difference in depiction and impact of the boarding school environment on the main character, building off of *The Catcher in the Rye*'s established model.

John Knowles' novel, *A Separate Peace*, written in 1959, focuses on two male characters, Gene and Phineas who are roommates at the Devon School in New Hampshire. This is set during

World War II, when boys were entered in the draft; focusing the actions on male-oriented activity. This book's boarding school atmosphere contains vague descriptions, making it arguably, "the most conservative American prep-school novel."³⁸ It is a novel that zeroes in on the dynamic between Gene and Phineas as they mature at boarding school; labeling *A Separate Peace* as a work of unseen academy. In spite of this, the boarding school environment still shapes the friendship between the two characters in ways that would not be apparent in a day school setting.

Unlike other boarding school novels of the 1950s whose narratives are laced "with unhappy memories of boarding school...Knowles used his campus to celebrate Exeter, not to settle scores."³⁹ Knowles attended The Devon School as a child but also modeled Gene and Phineas' Devon on his own boarding school, Philips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire. *A Separate Peace* applauds the boarding school experience and community rather than critique it, with the protagonist, Gene Forrester acting as the narrator. Arthur Powell defines community as a vague term that "means more than merely a group of people associated by common traits, ties or rules."⁴⁰ Gene has a strong allegiance to the Devon School which continues throughout the text. In the beginning of the novel, Knowles keeps much of the information about the Devon School hidden, letting the school reveal itself through the characters.⁴¹

Throughout his narration, Gene does not enter many of the buildings while he is reminiscing, so the initial descriptions of Devon focus on the exteriors of the buildings. As Alexander Pitofsky notes, "Instead of describing a meal served in the dining hall, he [Gene]

³⁸ Pitofsky, Alexander. "Unseen Academy: John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*." *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2013, pg. 407.

³⁹ Pitofsky, Alexander. *American Boarding School Fiction, 1928–1981: A Critical Study*. McFarland, 2014, pg. 50.

⁴⁰ Powell, Arthur G. *Lessons from Privilege: The American Prep School Tradition*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996, pg. 15.

⁴¹ Pitofsky, "Unseen Academy: John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*." pg. 393.

recalls a 'kitchen rattle' heard from the outdoors."⁴² The Dean's Residence at Devon is described in architectural terms, "a pure and authentic Colonial house, there now sprouted an ell with a big bare picture window" (Knowles 12) which allows people in the home to look out, but the reader cannot see in. Pitofsky also states that in *A Separate Peace*, "there are two Devon Schools; the vision familiar to insiders and the vague, incomplete version Gene presents to the reader."⁴³ This varies greatly from the structure in *The Catcher in the Rye*, since Holden describes his dormitory and the homes of his professors, and there is little mention of the façades of the campus buildings. The use of architectural descriptions and analysis from the narrators in both *The Catcher in the Rye* and *A Separate Peace* demonstrates their different relationships to their boarding schools.

The two main characters, Gene and Phineas, are roommates at Devon and the novel begins when Gene has returned to campus fifteen years after his graduation. Gene reminisces on his time on campus both during the Summer Session and the school year, spent with Phineas, nicknamed Finny, by his side. Gene is studious and focused on his grades, working hard for academic acclaim while Finny is a gifted athlete, whose athleticism is almost effortless. The two contrast each other through their athletic and academic talents which continues throughout the duration of their friendship. All of the actions are described from Gene's retrospective viewpoint, giving an adult perspective of adolescent activities.

Gene and Finny's relationships with death evolve throughout the novel but begin with their invention of "A Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session" where membership requires jumping out of a tree into a river outside of Devon. This jump is when the boys begin to test death, to try and cheat it with their adolescent mindset of invincibility. Their invented society

⁴² Pitofsky, "Unseen Academy: John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*." pg. 394.

⁴³ Ibid.

bonds them and forces their dependency, making them function as a unit against the world. Their society drives the novel and is an integral part of Gene's journey regarding his relationship with death which culminates when Finny dies unexpectedly due to complications during surgery for his broken leg.

Gene describes his summer on campus as, "The Summer Session—a few dozen boys being force-fed education, a stopgap while most of the masters were away and most of the traditions stored against sultriness—the Summer Session was over" (Knowles 72). Gene was present for the first enactment of the Summer Session, but he notes that there was a Winter Session as well, that was in its one hundred and sixty-third year, implying that the Summer Session would soon become a tradition. The Summer Session is characterized by lenient attention to the rules and a chance for extended learning, but in its first year, it is not a popular choice for the students of Devon, so the campus is relatively barren. The Summer Session is the centerfold for the society that Gene and Finny form during this ambiguous time.

Their "Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session," opens some of the first scenes of the text that indicate Gene's fear of death. In the second chapter, Gene and Finny jump out of the tree which scares Gene:

[Finny] 'We'll form a suicide society, and the membership requirement is one jump out of this tree.'

[Gene] 'A suicide society,' I said stiffly. 'The Suicide Society of the Summer Session.'

[Finny] 'Good! The *Super* Suicide Society of the Summer Session! How's that?'

[Gene] 'That's fine, that's okay.'

We were standing on a limb, I a little father than Finny. I turned to say something else some stalling remark, something to delay even a few seconds more, and then I realized

that in turning I had begun to lose my balance. There was a moment of total, impersonal panic, and then Finny's hand shot out and grabbed my arm and with my balance restored, the panic immediately disappeared (Knowles 31).

This begins their journey together which continues throughout the novel. Gene's original name for the society is morose, it is merely a suicide society set during the summer. Finny reduces the gravity title with the addition of "super." The alliteration of the title makes it seem lighthearted, but as a whole it is gloomy, especially since they are testing the limits of life by jumping out of a tree into the river. The boys are attempting daredevil activities and by placing them in the context of life or death, they are recognizing the ultimate consequences of their actions. This society is named before their first jump, showing that Gene and Finny are aware of the risks and the outcome if they do not exit the branch correctly. Throughout the novel, Finny holds the power in the dynamic, even in this scene, Finny changes Gene's name for the group with little resistance from Gene. Gene's fear of death and Finny's fascination is represented in their creation of "The Suicide Society of the Summer Session" at Devon.

By steadying Gene, Finny has taken the first step in ensuring that the title of the society does not come to fruition and instead, someone's life is saved so the "impersonal panic" dissipates. Gene acknowledges that he put himself at risk and needed someone else to help him. If Gene was on that branch alone, nobody could have saved him. During their jumps, Gene and Finny are off Devon's campus, without any form of adult supervision. The two boys are pushing their limits outside of the confinement of the boarding school campus. This successful jump entitles them to membership in their formed society, they are founders and therefore the most invested even though new members are added later in the novel. Marvin Mengeling views this

scene as the entire novel in a microcosmic sense, with Phineas enacting his purpose to Gene, restoring his balance in life.⁴⁴

However, when Gene and Finny's balance is tipped in their prospective senses, they do not restore each other's balances. Later in the novel, Gene is forced to continue down a path that Finny desires when Gene becomes an athlete through injured Finny's inability to be one. Finny is resigned to being passive, at least in a physical sense, through his injuries, causing the two characters to switch into uncomfortable roles. Their relationship to death does not falter through these shifts and Gene remains fearful of death while Finny is fascinated.

Gene's fear of death is restated after he almost falls to his death from the tree, "If I had fallen awkwardly enough I could have been killed. Finny had practically saved my life" (Knowles 32). Gene uses vague terminology, which also appears in *The Catcher in the Rye*, such as "practically" and "could." Gene regards death with the fear that had anything been slightly off, he would have died. Finny is Gene's savior, a role which he exemplifies throughout the novel, saving Gene in ways he does not always fully realize. The river and tree are meaningful for Gene during his reflection, "As I had to do whenever I glimpsed this river, I thought of Phineas. Not of the tree and pain, but one of his favorite tricks, Phineas in exhalation" (Knowles 75). This shows Finny's vigor while challenging death. The river and tree are symbols throughout Gene's visit to Devon; they represent his friendship. The two characters juxtapose each other through their relationships with death, what Gene fears, fascinates Finny.

During this pivotal scene, Gene is taunted by Finny and resigns to jump out of the tree, but his initial commentary shows his fear, "The tree was tremendous, an irate, steely black steeple beside the river. I was damned if I'd climb it. The hell with it. No one but Phineas could

⁴⁴ Mengeling, Marvin E. "'A Separate Peace': Meaning and Myth." *The English Journal* 58, no. 9 (1969), pg. 1324.

think up such a crazy idea” (Knowles 14). The comparison of the daunting tree to a steeple incorporates religious symbolism into the scene, as if God is watching them try to cheat death. Gene blames Finny for coming up the inane idea to jump out of the tree and initially dismisses it, not believing Finny’s intentions. The emotion that Gene connects with the tree are representative of his fear, he is intimidated by its presence. Before Gene launches into the story and history of the tree, he is reminded of a French phrase, “*plus c’est la même chose, plus ça change*. Nothing endures, not a tree, not love, nor even a death by violence” (Knowles 14). This phrase is central to a theme of the text, the impact of change. It is important to note that this is the first use of the word “death” in the novel. This quote also foreshadows Finny’s death, even though his death is not a result of intentional violence.

When Finny falls out of the tree later in the novel, his dreams of sporting fame are cut short, so he enlists Gene to live out his athletic desires. This does not work, and Gene is reduced to becoming the assistant manager of the crew team, a position that Finny scoffs at. When Gene is telling this news to Finny, he explains his relationship with athletics:

[Gene] I didn’t trust myself in them [sports], and I didn’t trust anyone else. It was as though football players were really bent on crushing the life out of each other, as though boxers were in combat to the death, as though even a tennis ball might turn into a bullet. This didn’t seem completely crazy imagination in 1942, when jumping out of trees stood for abandoning a torpedoed ship (Knowles 84).

The war is prevalent in the novel and this commentary places Gene’s fear within the context of the war. Gene’s anxiety and distrust of other’s athletic capabilities reinstates his fear of death. He draws parallels between sports and death which shows his rampant anxiety. The terms “crushing

the life out of each other” and “combat to the death” links sports to the war. Gene’s dislike of sports is centered around death through this allusion to war times.

In contrast, Finny enjoys the death-defying nature of sports and he thrives in combat. Finny’s largest obstacle is facing the fact that he cannot participate in the war after he is injured. His fascination with death would have culminated in the war, where every decision walks the line of life and death. After Gene remarks that “I’m too busy for sports” (Knowles 84), Finny refuses to accept this answer and so Gene resigns “to become a part of Phineas” (Knowles 84). Once Finny is injured and cannot participate in sports, Gene has to overcome some aspects of his fear of death. Gene feels guilty because he partially caused Finny to fall from the tree which led to his injury and inability to participate in sports.

Gene does not join any of the sports teams because he is “unable to take part in the boyish activities and sports of Devon because of his guilt.”⁴⁵ Throughout the novel, his guilt is present and effects his relationship with Finny. As the assistant manager of the crew team, Gene argues with another student, Cliff Quackenbush. Quackenbush is a peer who Gene describes “had been systematically disliked since he first set foot in Devon, with careless, disinterested insults” (Knowles 78). In Gene’s anger towards Cliff, he resorts to physical violence as a result of the boarding school setting. If Gene attended a day school, he would not have been angered that Cliff mocked his and Finny’s involvement in the Devon community.

While the Devon School is a confined boarding school environment, Gene describes the campus as one that “did not stand isolated behind walls and gates but emerged naturally from the town which produced it” (Knowles 11). The school, similar to most New England boarding schools, is set within a small town and “the houses along Gilman Street began to look more

⁴⁵ Ellis, James. “‘A Separate Peace’: The Fall from Innocence.” *The English Journal*, vol. 53, no. 5, 1964, pg. 315.

defensive, which meant that I was near the school, and then more exhausted, which meant that I was in it” (Knowles 11). There is an outside world accessible to the student body, so the solidarity of the Devon School lies in the lack of parents and the comforts of home.

Throughout the Summer Session, Gene and Finny take trips off campus, both to the river and to the beach and escape the limits of Devon’s campus. The novel is constructed so the school is not at fault for any of the injuries, whether emotional or physical. While leaving campus is not allowed, the administration of Devon is subdued during the summer. Through the lack of boundaries, students can test their own fears and fascinations with death. Finny conducts death defying acts, such as jumping out of the tree to fulfill his own proximity to danger while Gene studies attentively. The Summer Session is not representative of the traditional boarding school environment because it does not include the regulations and expectations of the school year. However, much of the novel takes place during the school year as well, which intensifies the main character’s associations with death.

While other critics have focused on the presence of a homosexual relationship between Gene and Finny, that is not going to be addressed due to its lack of correlation with Finny’s fascination with death.⁴⁶ These analysts have mentioned Finny’s clothing choices as evidence of his sexuality because in one scene he wears “a finely woven broadcloth shirt, carefully cut, and very pink” (Knowles 24). Finny wears this shirt because he wonders “what would happen if I looked like a fairy to everyone” (Knowles 25). This particular moment showcases the slacked attitude of the faculty during the Summer Session at Devon. This apparel would not be allowed

⁴⁶ For more information on the presence of a homosexual relationship between the two main characters, refer to James McGavran’s 2002 essay, “Fear’s Echo and Unhinged Joy: Crossing Homosocial Boundaries in *A Separate Peace*.”

during the school year and if Finny had attended a public school, or one without a dress code, this would not be an issue.

The faculty, of course, react strongly to Finny's public ignorance of the school rules. Gene notes, "No one else in the school could have done so without some risk of having it [the shirt] torn from his back" (Knowles 25). Finny enjoys treading these lines, whether it is through his fascination with death or by disobeying the dress code, it is an integral part of his character. Finny rejects authority within the boundaries of the school, giving him the ability to tread the line which he showcases through his fascination with death. The Devon School gives Gene academic goals which he wants to meet and instills in him, a fear of failure. In this regard, death can be seen as a type of failure, something out of Gene's control, so he is afraid of it.

In Paul Witherington's essay on the ambiguity of the language in *A Separate Peace*, he notes the importance of the structure that the Devon School provides and how Gene and Finny react to this enforcement. The difference between these two characters drives the structure of the novel through their opposing views of the Devon rules. Gene notes that at Devon, "If you broke the rules, then they broke you" (Knowles 74) which is indicative of his fear of death and punishment. Finny takes the other side of this and "is a breaker of rules, not incidentally, but systematically," which is a part of his role within the Devon School.⁴⁷

A Separate Peace continues to demonstrate the relationship between spaces and characters, in this case, how the boarding school environment impacts the character's fear and fascination with death. Finny once uses a tie in place of a school-required belt, therefore breaking dress code. This is the same day that Finny has chosen to push the limits of the dress code by wearing the pink shirt. Finny's dismissal of the rules makes Gene worry, "I panicked. In

⁴⁷ Witherington, Paul. "'A Separate Peace': A Study in Structural Ambiguity." *The English Journal* 54, no. 9 (1965): pg. 796.

his haste that morning Finny had not unexpectedly used a tie for a belt. But this morning the first tie at hand had been the Devon School tie” (Knowles 27). The shirt, while odd, technically did not break dress code although it raised a few eyebrows from the students and faculty. By forgetting to wear a belt, Finny is breaking dress code which, “are actual serious offenses only within the disciplinary framework of a prep school.”⁴⁸ This misstep exemplifies the rules that are essential in the boarding school model. This structure intensifies Gene and Finny’s fear and the fascination with death.

Innocence is a theme in both *The Catcher in the Rye* and *A Separate Peace*, which links these two novels further than the protagonist’s overlapping interests in death. Critics argue that Finny’s fall from the tree is representative of his fall from innocence which can be expanded to Gene and Finny’s relationships with death. Witherington notes that, “Gene’s emerging recognition of his guilt in Finny’s fall from the tree signals his passage from childhood’s innocent play to the responsible, ethical concerns of adulthood.”⁴⁹ In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden wants to preserve the innocence in children, he didn’t want anybody to lose their innocence. In *A Separate Peace*, Finny is unable to lose his innocence by not taking part in the war and Gene loses his innocence when he pushes Finny out of the tree and inadvertently causes his injury.⁵⁰

Gene’s loneliness is evidence of his fear of death, Pitofsky notes that other analysts have connected “Gene’s admiration of Devon’s ‘continual harmony’ to his desire to stop blaming himself for Finny’s death.”⁵¹ In the opening scenes, he returns to Devon alone to reflect on his

⁴⁸ Witherington, pg. 796.

⁴⁹ Witherington, pg. 795.

⁵⁰ Often, this loss of innocence is linked to the religious symbolism of Finny falling from the tree, which will not be discussed in this thesis. However in James Ellis’s article which is used in this thesis, “*A Separate Peace: A Fall from Innocence*”, he discusses the relevancy of religious symbolism in understanding the greater theme of innocence.

⁵¹ Pitofsky, “Unseen Academy: John Knowles’s *A Separate Peace*.” pg. 399.

time at the school. The confinement of Devon intensifies Gene's loneliness, not allowing him to deal with his fear of death. Gene faces his fear of death prominently through his friendship with Finny who he would not have met if he did not attend Devon.

Similar to Pencey, the motto of the Devon School, or at least the word inscribed above the doorframe in the First Building are "Here Boys Come to Be Made Men" (Knowles 165). This demonstrates one of the goals of boarding schools which is to guide their students to adulthood. The confinement of Devon is apparent through this inscription because the words loom over students entering the building. The students are subjected to the objective of the institution, they will be molded into men from mere boys. Throughout *A Separate Peace*, Gene is struggling to deal with his emotions surrounding death and it is challenging for him to move into manhood with the shadows of his fear following him.

After Finny survives the fall from the tree and later trips on the marble stairs at Devon, he has an air of invincibility. When he dies due to a complication with his surgery, the doctor tells Gene, "'This is something I think boys of your generation are going to see a lot of,' he said quietly, 'and I will have to tell you about it now. Your friend is dead'" (Knowles 193). Gene is in shock and notes that "I did not cry then or ever about Finny. I did not cry even when I stood watching him being lowered into his family's strait-laced burial ground outside of Boston" (Knowles 194). His reaction to Finny's death is the culmination of his fear through his inability to comprehend and move past this trauma. The Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session has come full circle, in a sense, and Finny has died after cheating death since the beginning.

The impending war advances the maturation of the characters and changes the mindset of the student body at Devon. For Finny, the war is a source of motivation which Linda Heinz and Roy Huss discuss in their article, "*A Separate Peace: Filming the War Within*" which was

published in 1975. This essay discusses the underlying theme of innocence in a world on the brink of social and psychological change. Heinz and Huss' article defines Devon's setting during war time as, "The distant trumpets of war that increasingly penetrate the ivy-league isolation at Devon coalesce with inner pressures to summon these highly ambivalent motives into the open."⁵² The isolating nature of boarding schools intensifies the impact of the war which is clear throughout *A Separate Peace*.

The war represents a culmination of Gene and Finny's fear and fascination with death. Witherington points out the difference between the two character's views of the war, "For Finny, life is a continuous effort to control reality by creating comfortable myths about it. War is only make-believe on the fields and rivers of Devon."⁵³ Finny has not comprehended the reality of war and cannot fear the war or death since they are concepts he has not grasped. Gene on the other hand, makes a more detailed comparison between the war and the school, "For Gene, the war with Germany and Japan is a simile for his experiences at Devon, less intense because less personal."⁵⁴ The impersonal nature of Gene's view intensifies his fear of death, the uncertainties of war scare him.

A Separate Peace demonstrates Gene's fear of death while showcasing Finny's fascination throughout their friendship on Devon's campus. Their relationships with death are introduced in the beginning of the novel and remain unchanged by the end of the text. Gene and Finny's relationship is the focus of the novel and there is a clear juxtaposition between their fear and fascination. *A Separate Peace* provides another example of a novel similar to *The Catcher in*

⁵² Heinz, Linda, and Roy Huss. "'A Separate Peace': Filming the War Within." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (1975): pg. 160.

⁵³ Witherington, pg. 798.

⁵⁴ Witherington, pg. 800.

the Rye with a protagonist who is fearful of death must deal with their fear on an isolated boarding school campus.

Miles' Evolution in *Looking for Alaska*

Looking for Alaska builds on *The Catcher in the Rye* and *A Separate Peace* by showcasing a fresh perspective of boarding school due to the novel's recency. Similar to the previously discussed texts, *Looking for Alaska* is a young adult novel written by a white male author about a white male's experiences at boarding school. However, for the protagonist of *Looking for Alaska*, somebody close to them dies in the middle of the novel so their relationship with death evolves from fascination to fear. This illustrates the impact that the death of a close friend has on the protagonist forced to deal with it in a boarding school setting. *Looking for Alaska* differs greatly from *The Catcher in the Rye* and *A Separate Peace* because the main character's relationship with death evolves, rather than staying sedentary, going from fascination to fear while they remain on a boarding school campus.

Looking for Alaska is the most contemporary of the three novels in this thesis, written in 2005 by John Green. It won the Printz Award in 2006 which was a jumping off point for Green who went on to write novels such as *Fault in Our Stars* in 2012.⁵⁵ The school in *Looking for Alaska* is modeled after Green's alma mater, a trend also seen in *A Separate Peace*. *Looking for Alaska* is the only novel that features prominent female figures since this is a coeducational boarding school set in past fifteen years. This text begins before the protagonist has set foot on campus, so it describes their reasons for choosing to attend boarding school. *Looking for Alaska*

⁵⁵ Barkdoll, Jayme K., and Lisa Scherff. "'Literature Is Not a Cold, Dead Place': An Interview with John Green." *The English Journal*, vol. 97, no. 3, 2008, pg. 67.

diverges from the other two novels because the main character's relationship with death evolves, going from fascination to fear after their close friend dies.

This novel's main character is Miles Halter whose connection to death begins through his hobby of memorizing people's last words. Miles chooses to attend the boarding school Culver Creek Preparatory High School in Alabama on the basis of "finding a Great Perhaps" which are the final words of writer Francisco Rabelais. The novel centers around Miles' experiences during his junior year through the people he meets, namely Alaska Young and Chip Martin. Culver Creek differs drastically from the serene, Northern scenes that the other two novels evoke which is seen in Miles' first impression of the school:

With cinder-block walls coated thick with layers of white paint and a green-and-white checkered linoleum floor, the place looked more like a hospital than the dorm room of my fantasies. A bunk bed of unfinished wood with vinyl mattresses was pushed against the room's back window. The desks and dressers and bookshelves were all attached to the walls in order to prevent creative floor planning. And no air conditioning (Green 6).

The austere setting stays constant even when Miles' life at Culver Creek evolves and this school bears little resemblance to the boarding schools of the other two novels. At Pencey, there is at least a semblance of comfort because when Holden mentions the chairs in his dorm room, he explains that, "The arms were in sad shape, because everybody was always sitting on them, but they were pretty comfortable chairs" (Salinger 21). Miles compares his room to a hospital, likening the space to the antithesis of life and health. The simple settings display a space devoid of any homely comforts and independence.

In Miles' introduction to his roommate Chip Martin, Miles states, "'Um, I know a lot of people's last words.' It was an indulgence knowing last words. Other people had chocolate; I had

dying declarations” (Green 11). Miles’ relationship with death is present from the beginning of his time at Culver Creek and he notes that, “I liked reading biographies of writers, even if (as was the case with Monsieur Rabelais) I’d never read any of their actual writing” (Green 5). This distinction is pointed out by Miles, he is aware of his fascination with people’s final words as opposed to their work. When Miles decides to attend Culver Creek Preparatory High School, he uses the words of Francois Rabelais, letting the author speak for him.

Miles’ enters the school with pre-determined expectations based on his own knowledge of boarding schools. He mentions, “I thought of the people I’d read about—John F. Kennedy, James Joyce, Humphrey Bogart—who went to boarding school, and their adventures” (Green 8). Miles is trying to compare himself to other people who went to boarding school during the times of Holden Caulfield and Gene Forrester, or earlier. Miles’ own expectations initially sour his time at Culver Creek on a comfort level through the austere dormitory layout he witnesses upon his arrival. As the novel continues, the surroundings fade into the background and emphasis is placed on Miles’ emotions and experiences as his relationships, both personal and with death, evolve during his time at Culver Creek.

The incorporation of last words guide Miles’ relationship with death and illustrate his response to death. In the other two novels, the protagonists are fearful of death and are not fascinated by it, let alone to the extent that Miles is. His fascination with people’s last words opens up the realm of analysis for Miles’ character development by demonstrating his interest in death prior to the death of his friend. When Alaska Young, one of Miles’ close friends he makes at Culver Creek, dies in the middle of the novel, Miles’ fascination with death turns to fear as he struggles to grapple with the finality of her death. The first last words Miles mentions in the novel are those of Francois Rabelais, “I go to seek a Great Perhaps” (Green 5) which sets up his

journey to Culver Creek. The final last words in the novel are those of Thomas Edison, “It’s very beautiful over there” (Green 221) which culminate the novel itself. Rabelais’ words guide Miles’ decision to attend Culver Creek which sets up Miles’ initial fascination with death, he wants to understand the legacy people left through their language.

Legacy, both in the sense of familial legacies at boarding school and legacy’s ability to shape identity, plays an identifiable role in this novel; Miles points out that his father and his father’s brothers also attended Culver Creek. While legacy is, at times, synonymous with prep schools and their role as institutions founded on wealth and connections; Culver Creek presents a foray into the modern boarding school. While Culver Creek has legacy ties, it also provides financial aid to particular students, such as Miles’ roommate Chip which supports a more diverse student body than the boarding schools in the other two novels. Culver Creek stands out compared to Pencey and Devon because it is located in the Southern United States rather than the New England area. Boarding schools are prominent throughout the country and have grown in popularity since the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *A Separate Peace*. Culver Creek is also a co-educational boarding school which sets it even further from its established predecessors.

If Culver Creek was an all-male school, without the presence and incorporation of the prominent female character, Alaska Young, the novel would be undoubtably different. Alaska’s character introduction is a pivotal moment in the text and when she and Miles first meet, Miles’ reaction is purely physical, “I barely heard him [Chip] because the hottest girl in all of human history was standing before me in cutoff jeans and a peach tank top” (Green 14). Miles’ sexual attraction to Alaska is what immediately draws him to her. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Allie was Holden’s younger brother, and in *A Separate Peace*, Finny was Gene’s best friend, so *Looking*

for Alaska demonstrates that the death of somebody, regardless of sex, relationship, or duration of friendship, can be impacted by the boarding school environment.

Since *Looking for Alaska* is the most contemporary of the three novels, it has been compared to its predecessors. By the end of *Looking for Alaska*, Miles has a fear of death, which directly likens him to both Holden and Gene through their similar relationships with death. Steven Bickmore and Kate Youngblood wrote an article in 2014 entitled, “It’s *The Catcher in the Rye*...He said it was in the kind of book you made your own. Finding Holden in Contemporary YA Literature.” This essay links contemporary young-adult novels to *The Catcher in the Rye* through direct comparisons of the protagonists and their motives. Miles is likened to Holden through their shared awareness of the world and adult’s evolving role in it.⁵⁶ Bickmore and Youngblood’s essay argues that out of the three main characters they analyzed, Miles is the least like Holden although he is familiar with Holden as a character. However, by the end of the *Looking for Alaska*, Holden and Miles are similar characters. This comparison is supported by their relationships with death because Miles becomes fearful of death, the same as Holden.

Alaska dies when she drives under the influence and collides with a parked police cruiser on the highway. As a result, she leaves Miles in a state similar to Holden’s with an overall dislike of life and questions regarding how to live without the deceased. In the beginning, Holden and Miles are markedly different, but Miles’ evolution from fascination to fear of death aligns him with Holden. Bickmore and Youngblood’s article notes this transition by claiming that after Alaska’s death, Miles becomes obsessed with the unfairness of the world around him, similar to

⁵⁶ Bickmore, Steven T., and Kate Youngblood. “‘It’s *The Catcher in the Rye*... He said it was the kind of book you made your own’: Finding Holden in Contemporary YA Literature.” *English in Education* 48, no. 3 (2014): pg. 257.

Holden.⁵⁷ The struggles of adolescence are contained within Miles' desire to have his questions about death answered through biographies.

Miles' pre-conceived notions of boarding school life impact the beginning of his time at Culver Creek. Since he is a part of a family legacy, Miles notes, "As alumnus of Culver Creek, he [Miles' father] had done the things I had only heard about: the secret parties, streaking through hay fields...drugs, drinking, and cigarettes" (Green 7). Neither Holden nor Gene enter their prospective schools with the same allure of tradition and Miles' awareness is twofold; he knows about his father's time at boarding school and the experiences of people from his biographies, such as John F. Kennedy and Humphrey Bogart. This impacts Miles' time at Culver, especially in the beginning where he is searching for his Great Perhaps in the form of secret parties and debauchery.

In the beginning of Alaska and Miles' friendship, Alaska quizzes Miles on his knowledge of last words by asking for John F. Kennedy's to which he replies, "[Miles] 'That's obvious,' I answered. 'Oh, is it now?' she [Alaska] asked. 'No. Those were his last words. Someone said, 'Mr. President, you can't say Dallas doesn't love you,' and then he said, 'That's obvious,' and then he got shot'" (Green 18). This is part of the introduction to their friendship and Alaska shares her favorite last words which plague the rest of the novel, the final words of Simón Bolívar, "How will I ever get out of this labyrinth?" (Green 19). The swapping of last words bonds the characters on the basis of their fascination with death.

While Miles and Alaska take humor in discussions of death in that particular passage, their relationship progresses to deeper conversations about the topic. When Miles and Alaska spend Thanksgiving break together on campus, she states:

⁵⁷ Ibid.

[Alaska] 'It's not life or death, the labyrinth'

[Miles] 'Um, okay. So what is it?'

[Alaska] 'Suffering,' she said. 'Doing wrong and having wrong things happen to you.

That's the problem. Bolívar was talking about the pain, not about the living or dying.

How do you get out of the labyrinth of suffering?'

 (Green 82).

This indicates the evolution of their friendship because it glimpses into Alaska's view of death.

In the beginning, Alaska and Miles share a fascination with death, they are both interested in death in their prospective ways. Alaska's mother died when she was young, and she was unable to move fully past it which is apparent when Miles and Chip try to reach a conclusion about Alaska's unexpected death. However, unlike Holden who also had a family member die prior to the beginning of the novel, Alaska is fascinated with death rather than sharing Holden's fear. Her own analysis of Bolívar's final words indicates that she has thought deeply about death and reached her own conclusions. Alaska has pushed the boundaries of Bolívar's words to emphasize her own struggles with understanding death.

Miles is forced to deal with death in an academic sense, as part of a final paper for his religion class where he answers the question, "what happens to us when we die?" This paper coincides with Alaska's final days and four days before her death Miles comes to a conclusion about death where he states:

Instead I talked about why I thought it was an important question. People, I thought, wanted security. They couldn't bear the idea of death being a big black nothing, couldn't bear the thought of their loved ones not existing, and couldn't even *imagine* themselves not existing. I finally decided that people believed in an afterlife because they couldn't bear not to (Green 100).

Miles' decision about death summarizes the final phase in his fascination with death. He has reached a conclusion about death and people's opinions of it which guides him throughout the beginning of the novel but is starkly abandoned when Alaska dies.

Alaska's death is halfway through the novel and Miles demonstrates a range of emotions as he tries to come to terms with her death. At one point, he debates leaving Culver Creek and returning home to Florida, "*Screw this*, I thought, and for the first time, I imagined just going back home, ditching the Great Perhaps for the old comforts of school friends. Whatever their faults, I'd never known my school friends in Florida to die on me" (Green 165). He resents Alaska for dying and leaving him to fare at Culver Creek alone during a particular stage of his grief. Miles' statements are filled with anger and his desire for comfort which likens him to Holden. Throughout *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden tries to return home, but it lacks the comforts that it once had since Allie died so Holden floats between multiple locations to try and find his place. Miles is stuck in a similar situation because Culver Creek is marred by Alaska's death.

The confinement of the boarding school environment is prevalent when Miles works through Alaska's death but for Miles the comforts of home would not help his grief. While Miles longs for home at times, Culver Creek is where he chooses to spend his time and he even opts to stay on campus for Thanksgiving break. For Holden, home is tainted by the death of Allie and Gene leaves Devon for war soon after the death of Finny, so he does not have to deal with the emptiness of Devon. Miles' is stuck on Culver Creek's campus, but there is nowhere that would comfort him while he comes to terms with Alaska's death.

Miles begins to express resentment towards Alaska after her death as he starts to question death and its motives. He grows curious about how she died and devotes the majority of his time

in the second half of the novel to grappling with the motives for her death. His entire reaction to her death culminates in the final pages of the text when he acknowledges how his view of Alaska's death evolved. Miles' fear of death is encapsulated in the lines, "I thought at first she was just dead. Just darkness. Just a body being eaten by bugs. I thought about her a lot like that, as somebody's meal" (Green 219). He imagined Alaska as the absence of a being and as something no longer of this world. This goes against what Miles argued in his religion paper when he stated that people did not want to imagine themselves as just "darkness" when they die which explains the presence of the afterlife in many religions. Miles was searching for ways to cope with her death and was left without any answers to how Alaska died or what happens to her now.

Suicide is a key part of the second half of this novel since there are multiple uncertainties regarding Alaska's death. While *The Catcher in the Rye* contains scenes where Holden ponders suicide, "I felt like jumping out the window" (Salinger 117), suicide is prominent in the second half of *Looking for Alaska*. Miles and Chip contemplate whether Alaska's death was a suicide or not for the remainder of the text and reach no clear conclusion. Miles and Chip question the police officers who found Alaska's car which leads Chip to say, "But that cop just shit sure convinced me that it might have been a suicide" (Green 164). Miles is frustrated with her death and states, "Maybe we should just let her be dead" (Green 164). He is trying to not think too deeply about the situation and does not think that getting definitive answers will make anything better at this point.

Miles confronts Alaska's death in different ways than Holden and Gene because he visits the place where she dies. When Miles and Chip are driving to see the spot on the highway where Alaska died, Miles states that:

‘Sometimes I liked it,’ I said. ‘Sometimes I liked it that she was dead.’

[Chip] ‘You mean it felt good?’

[Miles] ‘No, I don’t know. It felt...pure’

[Chip] ‘Yeah,’ he said, dropping his usual eloquence. ‘Yeah. I know. Me, too. It’s natural. I mean, it must be natural’ (Green 213).

This reaction to death did not appear in the other two texts and a new emotion is associated with death. Neither Holden nor Gene link positive feelings with the death of Allie or Finny. This conversation further signifies the evolution of Miles’ relationship with death and how he comprehends Alaska’s death at different parts of the novel.

Miles deals with death in an academic sense and reaches a conclusion to how people want to feel about death. However, when he is forced to deal with death on a personal level, his views are ever-changing. This novel provides a fresh view of the impact of the boarding school environment when it is studied both before and after the death of a close friend. *Looking for Alaska* is markedly different from *The Catcher in the Rye* and *A Separate Peace* through its location at a coeducational boarding school in the Southern United States and its prominent female character. These are points of comparison which demonstrate the evolution of the boarding school model by showing a protagonist’s relationship with death in an altered setting. *Looking for Alaska* provides a contemporary example of a novel that builds upon the pre-established connections to death seen in *The Catcher in the Rye* and *A Separate Peace*, Miles’ evolution sets his character apart.

Gene and Miles continue to demonstrate fear and fascination with death as protagonists of boarding school novels and show the impact of the boarding school environment on the

characters relationships with death. These two novels build upon the precedents of *The Catcher in the Rye* and provide examples of protagonists that have similar associations with death. The boarding school environment impacts the character's relationship with death in different ways than *The Catcher in the Rye*, but all three novels contain main characters who are fearful of death by the end of the novel. *A Separate Peace* and *Looking for Alaska* are novels that build upon *The Catcher in the Rye* through their protagonists and settings.

Conclusion

Boarding School Novels and Beyond

The Catcher in the Rye, *A Separate Peace*, and *Looking for Alaska* all demonstrate the connection between the boarding school environment and these protagonists' relationships with death. *The Catcher in the Rye* provides strong examples of a correlation that are built upon in the other two novels. One of the largest distinctions between these three novels is the timing of the death of either a family member or close friend which impacts the course of the novel. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Allie dies before Holden enters Pencey, prior to the beginning of the novel. In *A Separate Peace*, Phineas' death is told close to the end of Gene's time reminiscing on campus and near the end of his time at Devon. In *Looking for Alaska*, Alaska dies halfway through the novel, and Miles deals with her death while remaining on campus. The timing of the deaths is one of the distinctions between these three novels and provides a basis for comparison.

This thesis uses psychoanalysis to focus on the protagonist's relationship with death throughout the novel. There is an association with either fear or fascination with death for the main characters of these texts. Holden is fearful of death in *The Catcher in the Rye* and he remains that way throughout the novel, unwavering in his association with death. Gene is also fearful of death in *A Separate Peace*, both before and after the death of Phineas. Miles differs from these two in *Looking for Alaska* because his association with death evolves as a result of Alaska's death. These three protagonists are all either fascinated or fearful of death and are forced to handle their relationships with death on boarding school campuses.

In addition to the protagonists, secondary characters exemplify the contrasting association with death in two of the novels. Holden's younger sister Phoebe is fascinated by death which drastically contrasts Holden's fear. Gene and Phineas contrast each other throughout the novel, and their relationship with death is where they diverge. Phineas tests the limits of death throughout the novel, often roping Gene into his stunts. Miles shows both sides of the associations with death because he begins the novel fascinated with death but is fearful of death by the end. The main character's association with death is strengthened when they are connected with secondary characters who demonstrate the opposite relationship with death, juxtaposing the protagonist.

The boarding school environment links these three novels as the protagonist's shared setting. However, at points in these texts, the main characters leave their boarding school campus, which shows their actions outside of boarding school. While Holden visits home during *The Catcher in the Rye*, he does not interact with his parents and only talks with his younger sister Phoebe. When Gene visits home in *A Separate Peace* it is before Finny's death, so the influence of parental guidance is lessened without the aftermath of death. In *Looking for Alaska*, Miles goes home for winter break, before Alaska dies, but he remains on campus when she dies, without his parents.

The impact of the boarding school environment on the protagonist's relationships with death creates an argument about the connection between places and character development. *The Catcher in the Rye*, *A Separate Peace*, and *Looking for Alaska* articulate the repercussions regarding death and the boarding school environment. Through analyzing these texts, the protagonist's relationship with death is further explained by the role of secondary characters with

opposing views about death. This comparison clearly indicates the two perspectives of death which are seen in these three novels.

The connection between the environment and the character's views of death impacts the analysis of other texts. Novels depicting fictionalized accounts of student's lives on boarding school campuses indicate the effect of the environment on the student's life at boarding school. While not every boarding school novel protagonist has a relationship with death that sides with either fear or fascination, deeper analysis of the environment can reveal how the protagonist functions on a boarding school campus.

The culmination of this analysis leads to questions about the role of death in novels; why are certain protagonists fearful of death while others are fascinated and what purpose does this serve? The connection between boarding school campuses and death opens up analysis regarding death and other environments that are less confining. These three protagonist's associations with death strengthen the influence of environments and how the environment influences traumatic events. Through looking at boarding school literature with this perspective of death, the association between spaces and characters becomes essential to the text. The protagonists in *The Catcher in the Rye*, *A Separate Peace*, and *Looking for Alaska* would have handled the deaths differently if they were not confined on a boarding school campus. The environment influenced their emotional response and progression regarding the death of a person close to them.

The World According to Garp by John Irving could take the analysis of this thesis a step further by showing the impact of boarding school confinement in a lifelong sense. The protagonist, Garp, has multiple people close to him die, but he also grows up on a boarding school campus, the fictionalized *Steering School*. Garp's life is followed in almost its entirety, so the boarding school environment could be studied on its own or in accordance with Garp's

relationship to death. Garp's mother, Jenny Fields, worked at the *Steering School*, which shows an additional route of analysis by studying the impact of a parental figure living with the protagonist on the boarding school campus.

Black Ice and *The Fall of Rome* could use this analysis to study the connection between the boarding school environment and the protagonist's relationship to race because the main characters in these two books are shown both inside and outside of the boarding school environment. The boarding school environment could be analyzed to understand the influence of spaces on various aspects of characters. *The World According to Garp*, *Black Ice* and *The Fall of Rome* are just a few examples of texts that could strengthen the ideas of this thesis through its application to a larger variety of literature.

Boarding school novels can be analyzed through the impact of the environment on the characters or specifically on characters who have dealt closely with death. This thesis seeks to open the realm of analysis for other texts and show the influence and importance of setting on characters, creating a relationship between spaces and places which can be studied within the broader scope of literature. The confinement of the boarding school environment impacts the protagonist's relationship with death in *The Catcher in the Rye*, *A Separate Peace*, and *Looking for Alaska*.

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